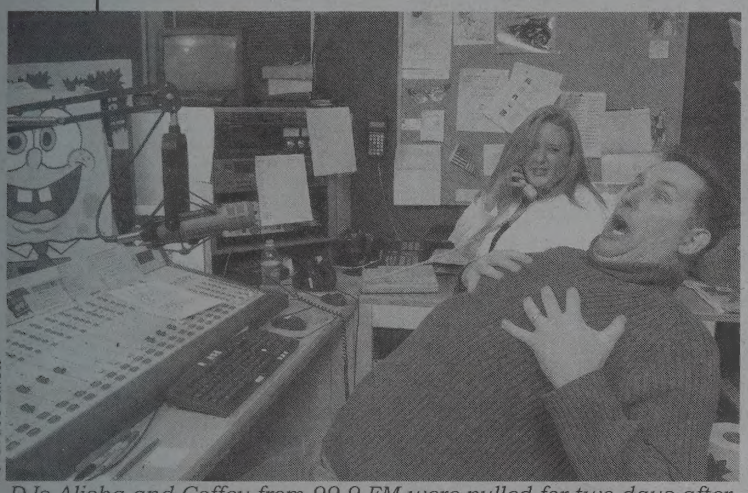
2/3 Independent

News

SquarePants, SquareTown

Radio station pulls, returns DJs as Focus on the Family sponges up

When Clear Channel yanked KVUU's Coffey and Alisha from 99.9 FM for two days after they engineered a mock protest at Focus on the Family, listeners like Theresa Zinsmeyer got a sinking feeling.



DJs Alisha and Coffey from 99.9 FM were pulled for two days after a SpongeBob stunt at Focus on the Family.

"This isn't right," she said. "The religious right is trying to control what is on air. This has become absurd."

The two radio DJs got in trouble for sending Chris Austin, a KVUU employee, to Focus' Colorado Springs headquarters dressed in a SpongeBob SquarePants Halloween costume on Jan. 24. Austin carried a sign reading: "I like girls! Focus on your own family!!!" and provided on-air updates to the DJs via cell phone.

It was a mock protest of Focus founder James C. Dobson's widely disseminated comments that SpongeBob could be linked to a pro-homosexual agenda.

The next morning, the zany DJs were off the air. Three days later, following a flood of e-mails supporting the DJs, the two were returned with the blessing of Clear Channel regional operations manager Bob Richards. Listeners like Zinsmeyer feared Clear Channel's motives for removing the DJs was a result of pressure from Focus.

Richards, however, maintains that he approved the protest, but only as long as nobody trespassed on to Focus' property. Austin had to be escorted off, Richards said.

"That was my one rule," Richards said. "They broke it."

On the record

If listeners can't quite shake qualms like Zinsmeyer's that Focus intervened somehow, they have good instincts, says Steve Rendall, of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a nonprofit media watchdog group based in New York. It's not the first time that Focus has agitated against pop culture and icons it considers offensive. "Rational people here have to ask themselves, 'Did (Focus) have anything to do with that?'" Rendall said.

Last year, for example, Focus pressured Clear Channel to contain shock-jock Howard Stern. Shortly thereafter, the radio company issued a zero-tolerance policy banning any speech considered offensive. Richards, however, maintains that Focus' pressure had nothing to do with the decision.

About a week ago, Focus launched a letter-writing campaign against several national journalists who wrote or commented on the SpongeBob story, including NBC *Today* show anchor, Matt Lauer. Dobson's views had been "vastly distorted" by the journalists, Focus claimed in the campaign that provided online forms.

The brouhaha stemmed from a Jan. 19 black-tie dinner in Washington, D.C., attended by Dobson, members of Congress and election backers. Dobson used SpongeBob as an example of the many cartoon characters that appear in a children's video that Focus alleges promotes homosexuality though concepts like "unity" and "diversity."

When the story started making Dobson look silly, Rendall wasn't surprised to see Focus push back in subtle ways.

On Jan. 27, the *New York Times*, which had broken the story, appeared to backpedal, he said.

The newspaper offered a correction in a tangential piece about PBS's decision to withhold an episode of *Postcards From Buster* because the children's show featured apparently lesbian characters. The story mentioned the SpongeBob controversy in passing, but not in a fashion amenable to Focus.

In the Jan. 29 edition of the *Times*, a correction to the story noted Dobson "said this month that SpongeBob's creator had allowed the character to be used in a 'pro-homosexual video.' He did not say the SpongeBob character itself was 'pro-homosexual.'"

Paul Hetrick, a spokesman for Focus on the Family, did not return calls seeking comment.

But Rendall, noting how SpongeBob became a metaphor and lightning rod for the public debate, offered, "Now that's a distinction with very little difference."

Corrections aren't easy to get out of the *Times*, he added, pointing to FAIR's own battle to get corrections for stories wrongly indicating Saddam Hussein could obtain weapons of mass destruction.

The election effect

The vulnerability of journalists to criticisms from the religious right is tied, ironically, to repeated news stories in which social conservatives are identified as being a big factor in the outcome of the November election, Rendall added.

Polling found that roughly one in five voters considered "moral values" the top issue. Yet the media has embraced the assertions of those conservatives who say values won the race by failing to ask whether "moral values" might have meant other things to voters, such as being anti-war.

"This hasn't been helped at all by the fact that you have scores of commentators since the November election falsely claiming that somehow religious values really won the day," Rendall said.

He added that since the early 1970s, numerous religious and conservative organizations and commentators have perpetuated the notion that the media is inherently liberal.

"You have journalists, editors, producers and news executives who've been battered by 30 years of being baited as liberal and left and all these other things," Rendall said. "They think it is in their interest to bend over backwards in deference to their accusers."

Meanwhile, FAIR's own studies of the media illustrate a different trend. The mainstream media leans slightly conservative, favoring business interests, the group has found.

FM in the a.m.

Late last week, Coffey and Alisha said they are happy to still have their jobs. They say they just wanted to encourage debate.

Their recent removal from the airwaves — however brief — won't prevent them from joking about Focus in the future.

"You can't stop us, you can only hope to contain us," Alisha said with a chuckle.

— Michael de Yoanna

Life on the phone

If you're in public reading this, you can probably spot at least one person on a cell phone. Cell phones are omnipresent in restaurants, movie theaters, concerts, bookstores, coffee shops, sidewalks, grocery store aisles and checkout lines — even classrooms, public bathrooms and hiking trails. Cell phone etiquette is an increasing rarity, with people conducting loud conversations, even arguments, in total disregard of everyone around them. But they — and the towers that enable them — are here to stay (see cover story, page 14).

Jane Glenn

Alamosa
College student

What's your biggest cell phone peeve? I predict that 20 years from now they'll have been proven to cause some sort of brain problem. Also, they're a hazard when people use them while driving.
What are your thoughts on cell phone omnipresence? A lot of people don't practice cell phone etiquette. People take cell phone calls and hold conversations right in the middle of a movie.
What's the most annoying cell phone commercial? To be honest, there's some really neat cell phone commercials. I love that Verizon guy who walks around saying, "Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?"
What's the best use for cell phones? I don't have one, but I'm about to travel back to Alamosa. If I have a breakdown somewhere, I'll have no help.
How did we survive prior to cell phones? I guess some people hardly did.

Phil Hillgren

Downtown
Maintenance engineer

What's your cell phone hot button? Restaurants. People holding conversations while everyone's trying to eat dinner.
How did our ancestors make it without cell phones? I guess they just managed somehow.
What's the most annoying cell phone commercial? The new one with that "oooh-oooh, oooh-oooh-oooh" song. Also, the guy in the trench coat who travels around solving everyone's lives with cell phone deals.
How would you restrict cell phone use if you could? I'd ban them in restaurants, doctors' offices, movies — any public area. Maybe have cell phone and non-cell-phone sections in restaurants.

Mary MacLean

Penrose Hospital area
Children's therapist

What's the most annoying thing about cell phones? Last night at the movies, someone in front of me had her cell phone open the entire movie, and it shined right into my eyes. It was incredibly annoying.
Do you have one? I do. I keep it in my car, though, and I don't turn it on.
What compels people to use cell phones everywhere they go day and night? They are a handy thing in terms of reaching people — work, connections, relationships, getting together.
How did people get by prior to cell phones? Things were probably more laid back and less frenetic.
What's the best thing about cell phones? They're handy. If my husband is at the store and I need him to pick something up, I can call him on the spot.
What's the worst thing about them? They're a danger when people use them while driving, but I have to admit that I do that sometimes, too.

— Bob Campbell

GARDEN OF GOD
SEASONINGS
CATERING A
1678 S.
471

THE MIKE BOYLE RESTAURANT SHOW
BOYLE LUNCH BUNCH
SAT., MAR. 12 • 10:30AM-1:30PM
SOUTHERN MAID DONUTS AND KOLACHES
PICK UP YOUR KOLACHES FOR ONLY 74 CENTS EACH.
DONUTS, COFFEE AND SODA.
DINE IN OR TAKE OUT.
6050 North Carefree
just east of Powers
Mike will be signing his new book *Mike Boyle Eats Colorado Springs* at this event!

HUGE FRAME
100's of frames to choose from
Oversize framing
Locally owned & operated
Largest
Image Gal
Corpor
Up To 25% Off Custom Framing Purchase
Not including Matting
Thru 3/31/05
Must mention this ad
Academy FRA
7620 North Academy Blvd • 265-6694 • M-F 10am-7pm, Sat. 10am